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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 002429

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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT AND MILF FORMALIZE CONTACT GROUP, SEEK
PEACE AGREEMENT BY FEBRUARY

REF: A. MANILA 2423 (MILF WELCOMES EAP A/S CAMPBELL
LETTER)
[1](#)B. MANILA 2273 (GOVERNMENT AND INSURGENTS AGREE ON
FORMAL PEACE TALKS)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Negotiators from the Philippine government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) peace panels at a November 16 meeting in Kuala Lumpur formalized arrangements for an international contact group (ICG) of countries and organizations seeking to boost the peace process and offer advice to the parties. Both sides reaffirmed their goal to restart formal peace talks in early December and ambitiously aimed for a comprehensive peace settlement by February. Under uncharacteristically determined leadership by the Malaysian facilitator, Datuk Othman, the parties agreed to formally invite the UK, Japan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia to join the ICG, and to invite several non-governmental organizations, including the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue and The Asia Foundation. In separate meetings this week with the Ambassador, the UK and Japanese ambassadors -- who both attended the Kuala Lumpur meeting -- expressed discomfort that the USG was not invited to join the ICG, and the Japanese raised the issue with the Philippine side. The Japanese ambassador also said that the MILF were "thrilled" to receive the letter from A/S Campbell reaffirming U.S. support for the peace process. END SUMMARY.

CONTACT GROUP FORMALIZED

[1](#)2. (C) At a productive November 16 meeting in Kuala Lumpur, the Philippine government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front peace panels agreed to invite four countries -- the UK, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey -- to join the International Contact Group (ICG) in support of peace talks, which the two parties expected to resume formally on December 3. According to a Philippine peace panel member, the UK and Japan still needed permission from their capitals, and the Philippine government planned to engage the Saudi and Turkish governments to explain more fully what ICG participation would entail. While the ICG's terms of reference have yet to be finalized, the UK and Japan shared a draft document with the parties and the Malaysian facilitator, Datuk Othman. The vague provisions of the draft, obtained by Post, describe the ICG as a leaderless, ad hoc, but "issue-specific" group based in Manila whose members would provide "impartial advice," "accept taskings" from the parties or facilitator, or "task an NGO to perform a coordinating role." The parties also invited four non-governmental groups to join the ICG: USG-grantee The Asia Foundation and the EU-funded Center for

Humanitarian Dialogue (CHD), well regarded for their long-term involvement in Mindanao and technical support to the peace process, as well as Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's second-largest Islamic mass organization, and the UK-based Conciliation Resources, a group that works in conflict resolution. The Asia Foundation and CHD accepted the invitations.

UK SEEKS FLEXIBLE INVOLVEMENT IN ICG

13. (C) In a November 19 meeting with the Ambassador, British Ambassador Stephen Lillie explained that the UK sought to play a useful role in the ICG but would not fund formal negotiations, which could advance quickly during two weeks of planned negotiation in January and three weeks in February. He said it felt "uncomfortable" that the USG was not represented at the Kuala Lumpur meeting. The UK reserved the right to reassess the role of ICG in the future, and Lillie noted it was unclear if ICG members would always be invited to attend negotiations between the parties. Still, he expressed hope that the ICG would become a tool for reminding Philippine politicians -- including the next administration -- of promises made during peace talks. Lillie speculated that Turkey did not have the resources to commit to the ICG, and he had no information on what the Saudi's interest was in the ICG. Uneasy with a public announcement, Lillie said he was surprised when the Philippine and Malaysian governments sought his concurrence on a press release.

JAPAN SAYS MILF PLEASED WITH LETTER, FOCUSES ON MONITORING

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14. (C) Japanese Ambassador Makoto Katsura relayed to the Ambassador November 20 that the MILF was "thrilled" with the EAP A/S Campbell letter (ref A) and with the USG's resumption of contact with top-level MILF members. Echoing the UK's concerns, Katsura said he, too, was "uncomfortable" with the USG's absence at the Kuala Lumpur meeting and said he felt strongly that peace would not happen without U.S. involvement. He raised the issue on margins with Philippine Peace Panel Chairman Rafael Seguis, who said that the MILF did not want the USG on the ICG. Japan's goal for the meeting, Katsura said, was to have the parties focus on renewing the mandate for the International Monitoring Team (IMT), in which Japan had participated. However, with the Philippines opposed to Malaysia's bid to remain involved in the IMT, Katsura admitted it was a difficult subject to broach. Katsura offered to keep the Ambassador informed as the work of the ICG progresses.

A PRODUCTIVE SESSION, AN EFFICIENT FACILITATOR

15. (C) Ambassadors Lillie and Katsura noted that the productive November 17 meeting proceeded with uncharacteristic efficiency, largely due to the determined efforts of Chief Facilitator Othman to strictly limit discussions about historical injustice in Mindanao. Othman performed his role in a professional manner and did not appear, as he had in the past, to favor the MILF's point of view, a perception that had previously damaged his credibility as a facilitator in the eyes of Philippine negotiators.

COMMENT

16. (C) The parties' informal and productive November 17 meeting is providing additional momentum toward the anticipated formal resumption of peace talks in December. Othman's professionalism and impartiality, as described by the British and Japanese Ambassadors, may have contributed to the meeting's positive outcomes. It is unclear whether

Othman changed his modus operandi because of the two Ambassadors' presence. We trust these friendly Ambassadors and our NGO contacts to keep us well informed about developments with the ICG. Given continued uncertainty about how the ICG will function, we do not regret that the MILF opposed our membership in the ICG; in fact, given others' limited resources and expertise, U.S. participation might have given us disproportionate responsibility for the ICG's direction.

17. (C) Even with the small string of successes at informal talks in recent months, serious questions remain about the Philippine government's ability to negotiate and obtain public support for a comprehensive compact in the final months of President Arroyo's term. To do so without inciting resentment from opposition politicians or triggering another Supreme Court case that could negate the agreement will take careful planning and maneuvering; some opposition voices are already making themselves heard. President Arroyo and U/S Seguis nonetheless remain optimistic that a peace agreement can be achieved before President Arroyo leaves office, as both of them underscored to Secretary Clinton during her visit here Nov. 12-13.

KENNEY